

Here is the point: \$1 billion for all discretionary programs for the Veterans' Administration is pathetic. It doesn't come close to meeting the needs.

I am joined by Senator ROCKEFELLER, who is the ranking minority member on the veterans committee. He will be speaking in just 1 minute.

The arithmetic is compelling, just on veterans health care: \$900 million in inflation, emergency room services for veterans who don't have any coverage, hepatitis C coverage we have committed to, the millennium program, which is so important when we are saying to veterans who are 65 years of age and over, we are going to begin to address your long-term care needs.

When I am in the medical center in Minneapolis and I am talking to a spouse of a World War II veteran, and this happens over and over and over again, she doesn't have a clue what she is going to do when her husband gets home. Where is going to be the care for her? Where will be the supportive services for him? Not to mention all the long waits of veterans for health care.

The county veterans service officers are the best of the best of the best. They do the work down in the trenches. I get my education from them. Even though they are not within the VA system, they talk about the long waits and the gaps.

This amendment is all about living up to our commitment to veterans. We need to provide full funding for veterans health care. This amendment should receive Democratic support and Republican support. The amendment offset by transferring \$1.7 billion out of these Robin-Hood-in-reverse tax cuts, of which over 40 percent of the benefits going to the top 1 percent. We surely can transfer \$1.7 billion to veterans health care.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia.

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be added as a cosponsor of the Wellstone amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Let's be very clear. The Senator from Minnesota is correct. For the Department of Veterans Affairs, under the budget resolution which is proposed, there will be tremendous damage to the Veterans' Administration and to the veterans of our country. It is axiomatic that the increase that is contemplated in the budget resolution simply will not work. It does not come close.

If there is anything which is an immutable fact, it is that the cost of health care and the cost of paying those who deliver it goes up by more than a billion dollars a year, just for health care alone. That is across America, and that is true for the veterans.

Beyond that, we have a very difficult problem of disability claims. We need \$132 million for staffing and tech-

nology. My veterans in West Virginia are being told they are going to have to wait for a full year even for a preliminary examination of their disability claims.

Lastly, we cannot forget our commitment to the final resting places of honor for our veterans. Our Nation's veterans cemeteries are falling apart in many cases. Graves are sinking. Tombstones are breaking. That may seem incidental to some. It does not seem incidental to any veteran's family.

I urge all to remember our promise to our veterans and support the Wellstone amendment.

I thank the Chair and yield the floor.

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. President, I would like to first commend Senate Budget Committee Chairman DOMENICI for including an increase in his budget mark for veterans' health care. This funding level is in line with what the Administration proposed in its budget request and shows a renewed commitment to veterans' health care.

While I am pleased that this budget includes an increase in outlays, I am disappointed that it falls short of the funding level proposed in the authoritative Independent Budget endorsed by 40 veterans groups and medical societies, including AMVETS, the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the VFW.

That is why I join Senator WELLSTONE in offering an amendment today that would increase appropriations for veterans health care by \$1.718 billion over the Budget Committee's level. With our amendment, the Senate budget resolution would include an increase in appropriations of \$2.6 billion for veterans health care over last year's funding level.

Our amendment pays for this increase in health care for our nation's veterans with a modest decrease in the \$1.6 trillion in tax cuts proposed by the President.

For a number of years, the VA had to contend with a flat-line appropriation for veterans' health care as the cost of health care far outpaced the rate of inflation. As a result, the VA experienced deep cuts at a time when it should have been addressing the growing need for medical care for this country's veterans.

For the past 2 years, I have offered amendments in the Budget Committee and on the Senate floor to increase veterans funding to allow the VA to continue giving quality care to veterans. With the help of the chairman, we were able to increase VA health care funding by \$1.7 billion for fiscal year 2000 and \$1.4 billion for fiscal year 2001. These were good steps in restoring budget equity to veterans' health care.

We must continue this process by increasing funding for veterans' health care to the level recommended in the Independent Budget. It is critical that we increase veterans health care funding over and above the Chairman's mark in order to compensate for previous underfunded VA budgets and to

allow the VA to meet the growing health care needs of our veterans.

Veterans from South Dakota visited my office recently with stories of understaffed VA hospitals, long waits for appointments, and reductions or cuts in vital services. These situations are not unique to my state and affect every VA hospital and clinic in the country.

With adoption of our amendment, we will have a VA veterans' health care budget that can adequately offset the higher costs of medical care caused by consumer inflation, medical care inflation, wage increases, and legislation passed by Congress.

Without a total increase of \$2.6 billion above last year's appropriation in veterans health care, the VA will likely be unable to address the treatment of Hepatitis C, emergency medical services, increased costs due to medical inflation, and long-term care initiatives.

The Independent Budget highlights the need to increase funding in a number of important health care initiatives including: an additional \$523 million for mental health care; an additional \$848 million for long-term care; an additional \$25 million to restore the Spinal Cord Injury program; an additional \$75 million to help homeless veterans.

Our efforts over the past 2 years to increase VA veterans' health care have helped to reverse the damaging effects of years of flat-lined VA budgets. We have an opportunity to continue this progress by adopting our amendment to increase funding for VA veterans' health care by \$1.718 billion over the Chairman's level in the budget resolution. With our amendment, we will fund veterans' health care at the level requested in the Independent Budget.

I urge my colleagues to support the Johnson-Wellstone amendment on veterans' health care. At this time, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD letters of support for our amendment from veterans organizations.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET,
A BUDGET FOR VETERANS BY VETERANS,
April 3, 2001.

To All Members of the Senate:

On behalf of the co-authors of The Independent Budget, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, we are writing to urge you to support the Johnson-Wellstone Amendment that would increase Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care funding to the level we recommended for FY 2002.

The President's "Budget Blueprint," and the Domenici substitute to H. Con. Res. 83 provides a discretionary spending increase of \$1 billion. This recommended amount would not even cover the costs of mandated salary increases and the effects of inflation. The Independent Budget has identified an increase for VA health care of \$2.6 billion over the amount provided in FY 2001. This recommended increase would provide the resources necessary for the VA to meet the needs of the men and women who have